

**LIABILITY**

# Widespread Failures

## inquiry into fatal fire finds faults with construction

By William S. Thomas

In September 2024, the panel investigating the 2017 fire in the Grenfell Tower in London, England, which killed 72, issued its final report, placing blame on those involved in the building's management, design and construction. In the public statement that preceded the release of the report, (Ret. - British Bench) the Right Honorable Sir Martin Moore-Bick, Chairman of the Inquiry, pronounced, "The deaths that occurred were all avoidable and those who lived in the tower were badly failed over a number of years and

in a number of different ways by those who were responsible for ensuring the safety of the building and its occupants."

The list of those held responsible included the property manager, government and code officials, but also, the manufacturer of the project's building materials, and the subcontractors, contractor, designers—including the architect and engineers—who reviewed, approved and used the volatile materials. The root causes were attributed to such behaviors as "incompetence,"

"dishonesty," and "greed." The massive inquiry included over 300 public hearings, 1,600 witness statements, opinions of 17 expert witnesses, and review of over 300,000 documents. The damning report is an austere reminder of every construction professional's paramount obligation: protecting the life, safety, and welfare of the public at large.

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The Grenfell Tower Fire stands as one of the most tragic construction disasters in recent



history. The flames claimed 72 lives. The final report issued by the inquiry panel delves into the multifaceted failures that led to the catastrophe, exposing a systemic breakdown in fire safety, regulatory oversight, material selection, and rigorous design involvement. The report's findings expose current and all too common practices within the construction industry which themselves expose people to unnecessary harm.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Grenfell Tower inquiry report presents a comprehensive analysis of the myriad failures that contributed to the avoidable tragedy. While the report takes aim at the building owner and management entity, government regulators and firefighters, most instructive is the report's conclusions about the construction professionals involved. The cladding system which was specified, submitted, and constructed, consisting of aluminum composite material panels with a highly flammable polyethylene core, was identified as a primary factor in the fire's progression. Additionally, the report points to a lack of effective fire-stopping measures and inadequate fire doors, which further compromised the building's safety.

The report uncovers specific lapses in the specification, design, and construction of the Grenfell Tower renovations. For instance, the refurbishment process that introduced the combustible cladding did not include a comprehensive risk assessment that accounted for fire safety. The design and installation of the cladding system failed to meet even the most basic fire safety standards. Moreover, fire safety measures such as sprinklers and adequate fire escapes were either absent or insufficiently maintained.

The construction industry has a long history of engineering disasters that have resulted in significant loss of life and property, including the Kansas City Hyatt Regency walkway collapse in 1981 and the Ronan Point collapse in 1968. In both cases, inadequate design checks and double checks and a lack of adherence to safety standards were key contributing factors. These historical incidents share a common thread with

Grenfell: a failure to prioritize safety over cost and convenience, and a complacency that can arise when oversight is weak or nonexistent.

Despite these past lessons, the industry has not always been proactive in implementing change. While some regulatory improvements have been made, the Grenfell disaster underscores a troubling inertia in refusing to adopt comprehensive safety practices that promote critical evaluations at all stages of the process. The tendency to prioritize economic considerations over safety, coupled with a lack of robust enforcement of code reviews and "red teaming," has allowed vulnerabilities to persist. The construction industry must adopt a more forward-thinking and proactive stance.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

One of the most critical takeaways from the Grenfell inquiry is the importance of specifying and submitting properly tested and verified standard-compliant building materials. The choice of construction materials should be guided by adherence to rigorous safety standards, which are verified through valid, independent, third-party testing processes. Material testing and certification processes must be stringent and transparent, ensuring that only products which meet the highest safety criteria are used in construction. Furthermore, design professionals must exercise sufficient diligence in specifying materials or reviewing submittals, taking into account not only compliance with current codes but also the potential future implications of those choices, particularly in an era of design resilience and climate change.

Attention to detail in design and construction practices is essential for ensuring safety and integrity in buildings. Thorough risk assessments should be conducted at every single stage of the project, from initial design development to final construction documents. This includes top-to-bottom code and quality reviews, evaluating potential safety hazards, and verifying that all materials and systems comply with appropriate safety standards. Product manufacturers, design professionals,

and contractors must work closely together, fostering a culture of transparency and accountability where safety concerns are addressed promptly and comprehensively.

To prevent future construction project tragedies, the industry must usher in a new era of modern best practices and foster a culture of safety and accountability. Design firms must establish ongoing education and training programs for architects, engineers, and construction professionals to keep them informed of the latest safety standards and technologies. Further, they should take the lead on fostering a culture of continuous improvement where safety is a core value and a shared responsibility among all stakeholders. To make this a more holistic approach, the design leads should encourage open communication and collaboration with product manufacturers, contractors, subcontractors and regulatory bodies to ensure that safety concerns are identified and addressed in a timely manner.

The Grenfell Tower fire serves as a profound wake-up call for the construction industry. It is a tragic reminder of the devastating consequences that can arise from a failure to prioritize safety, adhere to ever-changing regulations, and maintain rigorous quality review throughout the construction process. To prevent similar disasters, the industry must commit to a proactive approach, implementing best practices, advocating for regulatory reform, and fostering a culture of safety and accountability. ■

### about the author

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